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E.O. 12958 N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV ASEC AF TC  
SUBJECT: PRT/QALAT - KARZAI VISIT HIGHLIGHTS TRADE  
SCHOOL, IMPROVED SECURITY

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¶1. (U) Summary: President Karzai visited Zabul Province for the first time March 28, where he visited the PRT-run Trade School and the new hospital funded by the UAE. He also greeted people in the bazaar. His "pressing the flesh" may improve Zabul's poor security image. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) After frequent postponements, President Karzai finally made it to Qalat on March 28. Minister of Health Fatemi and the UAE Charge d'Affaires (CdA) accompanied the President. Kandahar Governor Assadullah Khalid and the 205th ANA Corps commander General Raoufi drove up from Kandahar with about 10 elders. The governors from Helmand and Uruzgan provinces were also invited, but were not able to attend. Zabul ministry officials, office directors, a senator, Provincial Council members, and leading citizens participated in the visit's events, as did students. The President's Chief of Protocol told PRTOFF that neither President Karzai nor any other Afghan ruler had ever visited Qalat before, and added that the President likes to visit a different province about once a month.

¶3. (U) Immediately after landing at the PRT compound by helicopter from Kabul, President Karzai observed welding, carpentry, rug weaving, and emergency medical training (EMT) students at the PRT Trade School. He also visited a computer class of

youngsters and was amazed how much they knew, quipping that he himself did not understand what they were doing. The Afghan instructors briefed him, with the PRT soldier-instructors in the background.

¶4. (U) The primary reason for the President's visit was the official ribbon-cutting for the UAE hospital in Qalat. UAE has spent over USD 4 million to build and equip the 150-bed hospital. Thirty-three students from the PRT female nursing class, which the PRT hopes will help staff the new hospital, met with the President. President Karzai was impressed that so many female students from Zabul Province (which is backwards and illiterate even by Afghan standards) were now able to play a role in improving medical care and access for female patients.

(Comment: The hospital is too big for Qalat, so Governor Arman is hoping to make it a teaching hospital with foreign doctors. The PRT is spending about USD 100,000 to upgrade the electrical and HVAC systems to handle the new equipment. The PRT is also training nurses, EMTs, and power/plumbing maintenance workers to support the hospital. End comment.)

¶5. (U) The last stop on the President's itinerary was the new Governor's Compound, where there were speeches, a private meeting with key officials and visitors, and lunch with the crowd (several hundred people, of whom an estimated 40 to 50 were women or girls). During the private meeting, the President asked the PRT commander to sit next to him to discuss the Trade School. After lunch, he asked the PRT commander to stand next to him and the Governor

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so he could publicly recognize the contribution of the PRT to Zabul Province.

Comment

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¶6. (SBU) President Karzai's visit did not result in any deliverables or substantive policy discussions. However, it did mark the first visit by an Afghan President to this backward province. The visit went very well and was a strong public show of support for Governor Arman. Arman, who has been in office for almost a year, is an honest and effective leader. One of his priorities is overcoming the province's poor security reputation. Zabul admittedly has security concerns (it was the only province in the country where interviewers for an ABC News poll last October did not go due to security), but its reputation is worse than it deserves. The Governor and the PRT have actively pursued getting the United Nations to return to the province, both for the intrinsic benefit of UN presence and also so that NGOs will follow. Hopefully, news footage of Karzai's visit and walk through the bazaar will help to improve Zabul's image problem. An added benefit of the visit was the President's recognition of the role of the PRT and the exposure given the PRT Trade School, a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

NEUMANN